DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 261 382 CS 209 248

AUTHOR McKenzie, Hope Bussey
TITLE A View from the Sea-cliff.
PUB DATE [78]
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Materials (For Learner) (051)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Diachronic Linguistics; Figurative Language; Folk Culture; *Imagery; Language Styles; Language Usage; *Literary Devices; *Literary History; *Old English; *Old English Literature; *Poetry
IDENTIFIERS *Beowulf

ABSTRACT

Intended for college teachers and students of Anglo-Saxon literature, this paper provides an overview of the sophisticated poetic devices used by the "Beowulf" poet. The paper examines how old English words for color range in hues in a way that modern English words do not, and how these words for color are used in "Beowulf." The paper also explores the Anglo-Saxon "kennings"--formulaic expressions of ideas by means of conventional terms, such as "sea horse" for ship--found in the poem. A third device that the paper explores is the interlocking of grammatical structures, or interlace, characteristic of the oral tradition from which "Beowulf" originated. (HTH)

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A View from the Sea-cliff

by Hope Bussey McKenzie
based in part upon the work of the
late Dr. John Godfrey

To the Teacher of Beowulf at College Level:

Sometimes it is difficult to find material geared to the young student of Beowulf. The following paper gives the student an overview of the poetic devices available to the Beowulf poet, including specific examples from the text, with lines indicated. This kind of background material enriches the student's experience with the poem and focuses attention upon the sophisticated poetic techniques employed in what may have seemed a crude and primitive stage of literary development.

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Hope Bussey McKenzie

A View from the Sea-cliff

The modern student of Beowulf finds to his dismay that the vivid pictures in his mind--the sea, the ships, the hero, the monster and his dam, the dragon--are not at all supported by the descriptions provided in the text. The student "hears" the joyous music of the hall as well as the old woman's song of death and future dissolution; the clanking and creaking of armor and the sounds made by the ship under sail are sharply defined in the ear of the imagination. Wind and waves, paved streets, ornamented swords, jeweled goblets, shirts of woven mail, shining helmets--all these exist in the imagination in specific detail of form, motion, and texture. so the treasures of Sutton Hoo have not so much astonished the student of Beowulf as they have expanded and confirmed his preconceived notions of their form and color.

Scholars in the field of Anglo-Saxon literature have partially explained the processes whereby the modern reader receives from the medieval poet images of things not previously seen. The scholars analyze kennings and compound diction and interlace in narrative passages; they write of formulas and alliteration and try to distinguish between the scop of the oral tradition, whose poem has been taken down from dictation, and the poet who does his composition in literary form, carefully preserving the devices of the oral tradition. But they have no way of assessing the reactions of the audience, except to tell us that both poet and audience were so steeped in the conventional devices of the old tales that there was a perfect understanding and appreciation of the language as art. But how do we understand? As yet,

the visual--and coincidentally the emotional--effects are only partially explained.

Of the several devices available to the Anglo-Saxon poet, the simplest and most direct is color, and yet the pallet seems severely limited, according to the standards of the modern reader. L.D. Lerner offers an explanation of why this should be so, especially in the light of the highly colorful ornaments the Anglo-Saxon civilization has left us.

> . . . [T]he complex sensation known as "colour" is made up of four different sensations: hue; . . . admixture with white, which makes a colour pale or intense; admixture with black, which makes colour dark or intense; and brightness, determined by the amount of light falling on or emanating from it.
>
> Modern colour words refer almost exclusively to hue. . . . As a result, we tend to assume that hue and colour are identical. . . . If concentration on hue is a comparatively modern tendency, we should hardly be surprised to find earlier languages using words which describe the whole complex sensation of colour. . . . It is not necessary to suggest, as has been done of Homer, that they were colour-blind. It is we who are colour-blind. They were hue-blind. (Lerner 159-60)

To begin with color-choices available in Anglo-Saxon poetry, we find that although modern readers recognize grene, read, blæc, hār, brūn, and fealu (or fealo) as translatable into "green," "red," "black," "gray," "brown," and "yellow," these words did not always mean the specific hue our imaginations supply. Fealu, as an example, may range in hue from yellow to yellowish green to a reddish brown, depending upon the object to which it applies. "The tawny highways" (Garmons-

way and Simpson 26) along which the warriors raced their horses, and which Klaeber suggests is Mead's "covered with pale yellow sand or gravel" (916), becomes "bay" or "reddish brown" when applied to mēares (865); in reference to the sea (flōd), "yellowish green" is Klaeber's definition. However, Lerner says that although " . . . it [fealu] seems generally to be intense rather than pale or dark. . . . [t]he essential quality of anything fealu is that peculiar brightness which almost obscures hue. . . . It should not be difficult to realize the resemblance between a well-groomed horse, a polished shield, a flame, and waves in the sunlight." (Lerner 162)

Read and grene do not appear in Bēowulf, but "red" is applied to descriptions of gold or a shining sword-edge. (Lerner 163) Grene, consistently used to symbolize life, is the contrast-word with black (evil) in the world of Genesis A and seems to imply fertility as a synonym for goodness. (Raw 54) Hwīt, "white," is the contrast-word in Genesis B, but in Bēowulf, the word seems not to mean "white" at all, but "shining." (1448)

It is interesting to note that brūn does not mean "brown," as likely as it would seem. The word, with its compounds, brūnecg (1546) and brūnfāg (2615), does not denote our hue-word "brown," but "with bright edge" and "shining," respectively, although Klaeber cautiously includes "brown" in each entry as a cognate. As Lerner points out, "brūn is used of a helmet, a sword-edge, the waves of the sea, the feathers of the Phoenix. . . ." and the only connection between these diverse surfaces is "that they flash in the sunlight." (Lerner 161) On the other hand, hār--"hoary" or "gray"--means exactly and literally what it says. In Bēowulf, the old one is the "gray one." (1307, 1678, 2988, 3136) "Stone" has no other descriptive word than the appro-

priate grammatical form of hār. The only exception cited in the scope of this paper is Raw's example from The Ruin (10) in which the stones of the wall are ræghār ond readfāh, "gray with lichen and red-coloured." (Raw 53) Only grene seems to have taken its modern meaning early in Old English poetry.

Another word available to the Anglo-Saxon poet and his audience is won (wann), not an indication of hue, precisely, although it is glossed as "black" in referring to the raven (3024) and "dark" when describing water (1374) and night (702); elsewhere, Lerner observes, " . . . [I]t indicates something . . . closer to gray than anything else-- . . . it always refers to a dull color," and he cites the waves, armor (chain-mail rather than a polished corselet, for instance), and a height above the sea. (Lerner 162)

Continuing in the tradition of reflected light as a basis for description, the poet had only a few choices to describe texture. Gold was either wunden--"twisted"--or fǣten--"beaten" (1193, 2246); a helmet was hwīt--"shining" (1448) or ōmig--"rusty" (2763) or perhaps hyrstedgolde--"wrought gold (with hammer-marks? or gold-encrusted?)" (2255); the warmasks--beadogrīman--might be bȳwen--"polished" (2257, from bȳwan, "to make dark," as opposed to rusty or dust-colored?) or feormod (from feormian, "to polish") (2253); the bosses of shields might be beorhte--"bright" (231); a sword is often brodgenmæl--"ornamented with a wavy pattern, i.e. damascened" (1667); and hringed --"formed of rings," perhaps "woven" or "knitted"--indicated the rough texture of mail. Even such a brief examination of texture--and of course there is much more to be said--at least begins to explore the Anglo-Saxon view of what constitutes a description of surfaces and to reinforce the idea that, since the audience was well-acquainted with how all these surfaces actually looked, the poet needed only to

indicate their light-reflecting capabilities to particularize them.

If ways of describing color and texture seem somewhat sparse and stiff, the real pyrotechnics of Old English poetry--the kennings--more than compensate the reader for his effort to understand the poetry of a distant culture. These kennings are part of the formulaic expression of ideas by means of conventional terms. A formula, according to Milman Parry's definition, is "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea." (Shippey 90) Metrical considerations aside (since they are outside the scope of this paper), the kennings, for all the predictable frequency, are nevertheless stunningly pictorial.

The word morgen, "morning" (1077), did not always have for the Anglo-Saxon poet and audience the hopeful connotations it bears for the modern reader. For the Anglo-Saxon, morning was a time of "cold, loneliness, the dawn attack," as contrasted with the feasting and singing of evening. (Shippey 99). There are a number of kennings that make this plain. For instance, the expression morgenseoc, "morning sick," which Shippey includes in his discussion of kennings, is only one of a list: morgenceald, "morning-cold" (3022); morgencolla, "morning-terror"; morgensweg, "morning-cry (actually wailing for the slain)" (129); uhtcearu, "dawn care"; uhthlem, "dawn blow, din, or crash" (2007); uhtsceaðu, "dawn-harm or -depredator" (2271). For the Anglo-Saxon, with his tradition of heavy drinking at night, perhaps these negative connotations of morning were doubly vivid!

Other instant verbal snapshots are isernscūr, "iron-shower (arrows)" (3116); hildelēoma, "battle-light (sword)"; or if the alliteration demanded it, beadolēoma would do as well; hildenæðre, "battle-serpent (sword)"; meotodsceaft,

"spear of God (death)" (1077). Then there are all the sharp, quick glimpses of the sea and ships: swanrād, "swan-road" (200); merehengest, "sea-horse (ship)"; merestræt, "sea-path" (514); hronrād, "whale-road" (10); meredēor, "sea-beast (deer)" (558); merehrægl, "sea-garment (sail)" (1905). There is a wistful ring to a kenning from another area of Anglo-Saxon experience, freoðuwebbe, "weaver of peace (lady)" (1942), since so often the web woven by the gift in marriage of some hapless lady came unraveled and she saw her new and old families kill each other before her eyes. (Shippey 100; Klaeber "Glossary"; 2029-31)

As Wrenn points out, the value of the kennings to the scop and his audience was that they were not only well known to both but were "modes of poetic 'variation.'" (Wrenn 50) They could be used in pairs, producing "parallel variation," another advantage to the poet in his composition, where alliteration and the hypnotic effect of repetition increased the impact of his spontaneous poem upon his hearers. For example, the Beowulf poet writes:

> Him sē yldesta andswarode,
> werodes wīsa word-hord onlēac:
> (To him the eldest made answer, leader of the troop,
> the word-hoard unlocked:) (258-59)

In the second line, two frequently used phrases exactly parallel the phrases in the first. But this is not mindless repetition, a defect in modern eyes; in formulaic poetry, the fact that the two phrases have been used and used again becomes an asset.

> Words commonly used become imprecise; but that imprecision is the result of tension between occurrence on one particular occasion and on all other, half-remembered occasions, a tension which leads to considerable force and resonance.

> Words gain a traditional, emotional aura for the poet to exploit. (Shippey 100)

In a more striking example, Wrenn cites the prhase, wintres wōma, which he translates as "terrifying sound of winter" (The Wanderer 103). In the moaning aural effects of the w's, the long ō, and the m, the skillful scop had a brief phrase that was satisfying aesthetically, useful in his metrical composition, and fairly packed with implications for his hearers that cannot be easily or quickly translated. Wōma, according to Wrenn, " . . . which originally seems to have meant 'sound' or 'noise,' has acquired connotations of terror in its poetic semantic development with the suggestion of a phantom. . . . " The Beowulf poet made use of a frequent example of parallel variation based upon the phrase waþma gebind, "the freezing sea," which took its extended meaning from the old Germanic concept of the frozen sea as being gebinden, "bound" with ropes. Thus, the Father "unbinds the ropes of water":

> ðonne forstes bend Fæder onlāteð
> onwindeð wælrāpas: (1609-10)
>
> when the Father unlooses the bonds of the frost,
> unwinds the ropes of the sea: (Wrenn 51-52)

Few modern readers have any idea of that ancient notion, but the image and its resonances are still fresh and vivid, eminently available to modern perceptions.

John D. Niles quotes Milman Parry's assessment of the difference between the oral formulaic style in Homer--for the sake of "thrift"--and in Beowulf--for the sake of "variation." As the modern reader becomes more involved in the study of Anglo-Saxon poetry, other contrasts in thought and attitude become apparent. The Beowulf poet is conventially adept at moving his characters and objects about, but their movement is stylized--the same words

appear in other situations, but magically, the meanings also change to suit the movement depicted in another setting. For instance, the infinitive gangan may express the idea of "going," but coupled with cuman, it presents an unforgettable picture of the troop in their armor entering Heorot:

Þā hīe tō sele furðum
in hyra gryregeatwum gangan cwōmon. (323-24)
then they to the hall first in their wargear came striding. (Niles 492)

They step aboard (on stefn stigon) (212) the ring-prowed ship, but elsewhere, stigon means "to mount up"; the ship is winde gefȳsed, "wind impelled" (217), but in other circumstances, it means "readied for" (230); Grendel wōd ("advanced") (9214), but the translation is often "plodded"; the young warriors on their horses go flitende ("contending," here, "racing"(9916) along the graveled road; and at Beowulf's entry into the lake, brimwylm onfēng hilderince ("the surge of the lake received the warrior" (1494-95). The reader watches as the ancient sword is destroyed:

Þā ðæt sweord ongan
æfter heaðoswāte hildegicelum
wīgbil wanian. (1606-07)
Then that sword, because of blood shed in battle, into icicles (that sword) began to melt.

In the midst of all this movement, Lewis E. Nicholson reminds us that there are other reflections of movement in the Anglo-Saxon culture. The non-naturalistic art objects left to the world at Sutton Hoo, as well as many illuminated manuscripts, make the observer aware that there are analogies between the different arts of a given culture in formal organization and techniques. Nicholson says of the Anglo-Saxons that they had

> . . . ingrained æsthetic feeling for the manipulation of stock patterns, whether visual or verbal, with the result that the interlocked boars on the Sutton Hoo clasps become a fantastic geometrical abstraction, not a realistic picture. (Nicholson 237)

He points also to the niello design of the whirling snakes and other animal patterns, the lines that weave and unwind. (Nicholson 238-39)

It is certainly not unreasonable that, in the language of a people so intrigued by the interlocking of forms, the Anglo-Saxon would also take pleasure in the interlocking of grammatical structures. Interlace--the Latinists called it hyperbaton, "inversion of the natural order of words"--provided the Beowulf poet with a device which acted upon his listeners very much as rapid camera movements act upon a modern audience: in both cases the audience has a sense of seeing or hearing many different things simultaneously. (Bolton 32) To present the like elements of this phenomenon, the following figure employs color:

Hafast þu gefēred,
Gēata lēodum
sib gemæne,
inwitniþas,
wesan, þenden ic wealde
māþmas gemæne,
þæt þām folcum sceal,
ond Gār-Denum
ond sacu restan,
þē hīe ær drugon,
wīdan rīces,
(1855-60)

Again, the love of weaving--over, under, with threads of the same color surfacing again in the web at another spot--produces a sensation of movement, not random, but deliberate, creating a kind of pattern dear to the Anglo-Saxon heart. The modern reader who becomes aware of the nature of these patterned passages may begin to see them, not as confused, but as dignified and psychologically stimulating.

One more example of interlace on an extended basis is found in Shippey, where he traces the interlocking of parallel expressions in Daniel, Andreas, and Juliana. (Shippey 86-87) Although these works are outside the scope of this paper, Shippey's delineation of a stylized and abstract pattern is interesting.

In another area, this love of pattern is one of the factors which has created for the reader in our day a most unexpected effect: for the most part, the world of nature is as stylized as the Sutton Hoo buckle. As Barbara Raw points out, the poet refers to certain standard features of landscape, usually without any distinguishing characteristics. At the reader's very first look at Bēowulf, he sees the hero against a backdrop of brimclifu, "the sea cliffs" (222); when Bēowulf describes his fight with the sea-beasts, he reports that the swell of the sea died down until he could see the sænæssas, "headlands" (571). But, the modern reader protests, these are not the same coasts--there surely must have been some differences between them. When the Geats reach home, they see the Gēata clifu, "cliffs of the Geats" (1911), and cuþe næssas, "well-known bluffs" (1912), but neither of the features nor the sande, "beach" (1917), sæwong, "sea-plain" (1964), nor the wīde waroðas, "wide shore" (1965), are in any way distinguished from those of any other country. The headland on which Bēowulf seats himself to plan his strategy in the fight with the dragon and to look back over his life is simply a næss like every other. The beorg, "elevated shore" (211), where the boat of the Geats set out for Heorot is not differentiated from the beorg, "cliff" (3143), where Bēowulf's great funeral pyre was set ablaze. If they were the same, there is nothing to tell the reader so.

Other features of the natural world--mere, flōd, holm,

mist-hlið, holt, wolcen, wong--are similarly stylized. But considering the response of a modern reader to the differing situations in which these features appear, it seems possible that the Anglo-Saxon audience, caught up in the mood and action of the passage, might easily particularize the scene. The hills of home do not resemble the hills of a foreign land; the poet, freed from the tyranny of adjectives and adverbs, also frees his audience to perceive in the abstraction the perfect setting of "a heroic world in which ideals matter more than nationality." (Raw 50)

In only one famous passage is nature given individuality, Hrōðgār's description of the mere where the monsters live. As Wrenn says, "Anglo-Saxon nature poetry, in its often almost Hardyesque subjective gloom, is seen at its finest in this description. . . ." (Wrenn 114) He goes on then to translate the passage in a prose version:

> They live in a land of mysterious secrecy, slopes haunted by wolves, wind-swept headlands, a terrifying region which crosses the fenlands where the mountain torrent goes deep down neath the mist-covered rocks, in a flood under the earth. It is not far from thence in measured miles that there stands the mere, above which there overhang thickets of bushes covered in hoar-frost: and the water is shadowed above by densely-rooted forest. At that place every night is to be beheld a mysteriously terrifying sight, fire upon the water. There is none of those wise in age among the children of men who knows its depth. Even though the stag who traverses the heath strong in his horns may seek the forest when hard pressed by hounds from afar in flight, he will give up his life on the mere's bank

> before he will dive in to hide his head. That is not a place of pleasantness. From there the swirling of the waves rises up dark beneath the clouds when the wind stirs up horrible storms, till the air becomes choking mist and the skies weep. (1357-76) (Wrenn 114-15)

Granting that this passage is fully within the tradition of "Hardeyesque gloom" that is characteristic of Anglo-Saxon poets, such specific details are not usual in the oral tradition, but more identifiable as the work of a literate poet. Niles quotes Brodeur, who remarked the Beowulf poet's "splendor of language" here and elsewhere: ". . . its wealth and sureness attest that Beowulf is the work, not of an illiterate singer, but of a great literary artist, dominating, expanding, and transcending the limits of the form in which he elected to compose." (Niles 502)

However that may be, in even this sidelong glance at the resources of the Anglo-Saxon poet, some conclusions may seem possible. In employing the universal rather than the particular--in all but the characters and action, the poet appealed to the subconscious love of his culture for pattern and abstraction. He could hardly have had any anticipation of some other culture, to be developed a thousand years later out of elements that would make it increasingly alien to his world. Even so, the modern reader, before he is fully aware of strategies and techniques and devices that convey the old story to new eyes, apprehends the essense "that broke through language and escaped." (Browning, 1.90, 502) As for the poet himself, he seems to have been able to draw into the strict requirements of his poetic expression a luminous quality that lighted and still lights up his world. As Niles says, he was

> . . . no more oppressed by the conventional terms

> of his craft than the artisans who fashioned the Sutton Hoo jewelry seem to have felt oppressed by the conventional figures of Germanic design. . . . this language of princes, of thrones, of deadly combat, of treasure, of ships, and the sea . . . expressed the best in the tradition of his fathers. (Niles 503)

And somehow, "the best" remains accessible to every succeeding generation from moncyn to mankind.

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